

## **Christ the King Sunday – November 22, 2020**

### **Introduction**

**In 1925, Pope Pious XI instituted the Festival of Christ the King as part of the Roman Catholic liturgical year.** His goal was to make the reign of Christ more real in the lives of the laity. As the Reformation Churches [Lutheran, Episcopal/Anglican, and the United Church of Christ among others] adopted the Revised Common Lectionary, the **Festival of Christ the King** was celebrated yearly on the last Sunday of the church year. Most of us have images of kings that are shaped by our reading of history. However, the Revised Common Lectionary chooses texts that explore the unique dimensions of Christ's kingship. In **Year A**, we explore the kingship of Jesus in light of Matthew's telling of The Parable of the Great Judgment. In **Year B**, the lectionary turns to the Gospel of John as the imprisoned Jesus and the Roman governor Pontius Pilate talk of nature of God's Kingdom what it means for Jesus. And finally in **Year C**, the Gospel of Luke provides a final picture of Jesus 'enthroned' on a Roman Cross as the 'penitent thief' asks Jesus to remember him when he comes into his kingdom.

**So why not use the image of the King that Paul describes in his Letter to the Colossians?** [Text follows]. Why not 'the image of God,' 'the ruler of angels,' 'the head of all creation,' 'the firstborn of the dead,' and 'the fullness of God?' Why not present this King to the world for celebration and worship? Is this not the real Christ?

**Most certainly, it is; but it is not the Christ we experience in our lives.** The Christ of our experience is the Christ who bleeds with his people, who shares in our suffering, who anguishes over loved ones, and who comforts those who have no hope. However, this **Christ the King** is not popular in our world. Instead, we prefer a king who is sought out, not hunted down; a king who is crowned with gold, not with thorns; a king who leads soldiers, not one who is beaten by them.

**But such a king has little appeal for us.** It is not easy to become the servant of this crucified king. It isn't easy to share his agony, his rejection, and his death. It is not easy to admit to the world that the power of God is revealed in weakness and death. Like many people, we want nothing to do with **Christ the King** who cannot save himself.

**But there is good news; it comes to us on the lips of the dying thief crucified with Jesus.** This dying sinner, this reprobate who deserved the death he was dying, through some gift of the Holy Spirit, saw that this dying Jesus somehow had the power to give life. Realizing that he was going to die a sinner; realizing that he had no other place to turn for help, the thief cried out, '**Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom!**' And from the Crucified King's bloodied lips, we who are sinners — we who need help

from our crucified king — we hear the words, **‘TODAY, YOU SHALL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE.’** In death, **Christ the King** assumed his rightful position as the ‘Lord of Life.’ And come what may, Jesus is watching and as **Christ the King**, he will remember us!

**In Christ ✝,  
Pastor Steve**

### **Scripture Lesson – Colossians 1.11-20**

**Paul writes to the Christians in Colossae:** <sup>11</sup>May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully <sup>12</sup>giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. <sup>13</sup>He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, <sup>14</sup>in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. <sup>15</sup>He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; <sup>16</sup>for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers — all things have been created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup>He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup>He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. <sup>19</sup>For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, <sup>20</sup>and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

### **Gospel – Matthew 25.31-46**

**[Jesus told his disciples another parable],** <sup>31</sup>“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. <sup>32</sup>All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, <sup>33</sup>and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.

“<sup>34</sup>Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; <sup>35</sup>for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup>I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ <sup>37</sup>Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? <sup>38</sup>And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? <sup>39</sup>And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ <sup>40</sup>And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you,

*just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'*

*“<sup>41</sup>Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; <sup>42</sup>for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, <sup>43</sup>I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ <sup>44</sup>Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ <sup>45</sup>Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ <sup>46</sup>And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”*

### ***‘Does the Reign of Christ Make a Difference?’***

***Let us pray.*** Lord Jesus, be present this day and make yourself known in the Word that gives life. Lighten our darkness, dear Jesus, and open our hearts to those whom it would be easy to forget. Send your Holy Spirit upon us so that we might find the courage to give food to the hungry, water to the thirsty, and clothing to the ill-covered. For it is in serving them that we find you. We ask this in your name. Amen.

***Brothers and sisters, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.***

***Bookstores have always fascinated me.*** When the Rosedale shopping center was first built, one of the original stores was *B. Dalton Booksellers*. No trip to Rosedale was complete without going to *B. Dalton’s*. My first stop was always the history section; especially military and political histories. After the history section, I would go to the science section. I looked for titles under the ‘Physics and Cosmology.’ *Theoretical physics and cosmology*. Perhaps I am still a frustrated engineer at heart.

***On one of my trips to the bookstore, I encountered a new author; his name was Loren Eiseley.*** Eiseley graduated from the University of Nebraska with a degree in anthropology. He later earned his doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania where he later taught. His primary interest was paleontology, especially in the area of human origins. The book that caught my eye was collection of essays entitled ***The Star Thrower***. One literary critic said that ‘*[Dr. Eiseley] has the uncanny ability to make us feel that we are accompanying him on a journey into the very heart of the universe. Whether he is explicating history or commenting on the ideas of a philosopher, a scientist, or a theologian, he takes us with him on a personal visit.*’ To be honest with you, I ordered several more of his books from Amazon.com when I was writing this sermon.

**The Star Thrower takes its theme from a short piece Eiseley wrote to serve as a preface to the collection of essays.** It goes like this:

Early one morning, a man was walking along the beach. The sun was rising, the evening rain had ended, and the rainbows were magnificent. While enjoying the beauty around him, he glanced down the beach and saw a lonely figure who appeared to be dancing. Fascinated by what he saw, the man walked closer. As he came closer, he realized that the young man was not dancing. In one graceful movement, he was picking objects off the beach and tossing them into the sea. Approaching the young man, he saw that the objects were starfish.

He asked, 'Why are you throwing starfish into the water?' The young man answered, 'If the starfish are still on the beach when the sun rises in the sky, they will die.' As the young man spoke, he threw another starfish into the sea.

[The skeptic said,] 'That's ridiculous! There are thousands of miles of beach and millions of starfish. You can't really believe that what you are doing could possibly make a difference!'

The young man picked up another starfish and paused thoughtfully. Then he said, 'It makes a difference to this one.' With that, he threw the starfish into the sea.'

**Today is Christ the King Sunday. This is the day we acknowledge the sovereignty of Christ in our lives.** Christ the King Sunday is a reminder that we do not live only for ourselves, but for the One whom we call 'Lord and Savior.' But as Americans, we have difficulty with the image of 'king.' It seems to me that we can best understand what a king is if we think in terms of 'absolute power.' During time of war or national emergencies, presidents often make claims of 'absolute power' that supersede the rights of the individual.

**For most of human history, a king was someone who had the absolute power of life and death over the subjects of his kingdom.** Such kings were understood to rule by divine right, chosen by God for their office. The king was a factor in every aspect of his people's lives: he provided for them; he protected them; and, if need be, he disciplined them. Their wellbeing depended upon the king's good pleasure.

**On the Festival of Christ the King, the church picks up the royal imagery that has been left unused since last Christmas.** In the royal Psalms, God is worshiped as the ‘King of Creation . . . Lord of Lords.’ The prophet Daniel envisions ‘one like the Son of Man’ [using the RSV’s translation] who is ‘given dominion and glory and kingdom that all peoples and nations . . . should serve him . . .’ **Christ the King Sunday** is a reminder that who we are and what we do, are not ends in themselves . . . A reminder that we owe ultimate allegiance to someone other than ourselves . . . A reminder that the old way of thinking about kings has been changed by a martyred king who stripped away the trappings of kingship and replaced it with a self-giving love for others.

**But rather than talk about kingship, I started to wonder what this new Kingdom might look like.** What would it be like to experience the ‘reign of Christ’ in its fullest. In today’s Gospel, St. Matthew gives us an idea; but he does so using a parable of judgment. Jesus is described as a judge with all the nations arrayed before him; but this judge comes with a unique perspective. Not only is he one of us, but he is also the Crucified One; the One who died for a sinful world.

**At first hearing, this image of the Great Judgment of the nations brings us little comfort.** In fact, the judgment rendered borders on the absurd. The King’s standard of judgment is *compassion*. It turns out that the judgment Jesus pronounces on us is the same judgment we pronounce upon ourselves by our willingness to show compassion for others. To those on his right hand, the King says, **‘COME O BLESSED OF MY FATHER, INHERIT THE KINGDOM PREPARED FOR YOU . . . FOR I WAS HUNGRY AND YOU GAVE ME FOOD, I WAS THIRSTY AND YOU GAVE ME DRINK, I WAS A STRANGER AND YOU WELCOMED ME, I WAS NAKED AND YOU CLOTHED ME, I WAS SICK AND YOU VISITED ME, I WAS IN PRISON AND YOU CAME TO ME.’** But his servants will say to him, **‘Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give you drink, or naked and clothe thee, or in prison and visit thee?’** And the King will answer, **‘TRULY, I SAY TO YOU, AS YOU DID IT TO ONE OF THE LEAST OF THESE WHO ARE MEMBERS OF MY FAMILY, YOU DID IT TO ME.’**

**Then those on the King’s left hand are judged by the same standard.** But they had no food for the hungry, no water for the thirsty, no clothes for the naked, and no time for the sick. And the King will say to them, **‘DEPART FROM ME . . . INTO THE ETERNAL FIRE PREPARED FOR THE DEVIL AND HIS ANGELS . . . TRULY, I SAY TO YOU, JUST AS YOU DID NOT DO IT TO ONE OF THE LEAST OF THESE WHO ARE MEMBERS OF MY FAMILY, YOU DID NOT DO IT TO ME.’**

***The Parable of the Great Judgment marks the end of Jesus' public teaching before his passion and death.*** What began as a discussion about the end of the world, ends with words of judgment. First Jesus told the parable of the missing bridegroom and the ten maidens who wait for the bridal party; then the parable of the master and servants who are given charge of his fortune while he's gone; and finally, a parable of judgment as the righteous and unrighteous are separated by the King based on good deeds.

***The crowds, as well as the disciples, must have been both mystified and frightened.*** *Mystified* because of all this talk about judgment. They all had a sense that God would bring an end to the world and judge every person, *but why make it so personal? And frightened* because this last parable provides a nearly impossible standard for judgment: *One's concern for the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the strangers – The starfish drying out on the beach.*

***Perhaps that's why this parable also puts us ill-at-ease.*** We are unpleasantly surprised because we discover that Jesus is present in those very people who cannot seem to make it on their own in our success-driven world. We have always assumed that Jesus is present here at Church as we worship in person or online. And that is true; but he is also present in the outside world as well. This parable is troublesome because it does not allow us to put Jesus in heaven and leave him there. Not only is Jesus present at the right hand of God, but he is also present in those who are our neighbors.

***Jesus defines 'neighbor' as anyone who is in need.*** Our less fortunate neighbors confront us with the reality of God. Their cries for help are God's words of judgment spoken to our faces. In a rather perverse way, these unwanted strangers are instrumental in our salvation because their presence is also a guarantee of Lord Jesus' presence. And strangely, it's a matter of life and death for both them and us.

***Two final points have to be made. First, this last parable of Jesus might well be a parable of grace.*** At first hearing, it sounds like a parable of judgment that may well lead us to start pigeonholing people as 'good' or 'bad' based on how we view their deeds. To do so is to imply salvation by works. ***But that is a misreading of the parable.*** This is a parable of grace because everyone is given the opportunity time and time again to choose life. Both the righteous and the unrighteous receive God's gracious invitation to be part of the Kingdom along with others; be they successful and well-polished or homeless and unwanted.

**What makes this a parable of grace is that everyone is surprised by the outcome.** No one set out to ‘earn their salvation.’ Both the righteous and the unrighteous are ignorant of our Lord’s presence as they encounter the ‘the least of these’ who are the members of Jesus’ family. **Both say, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry . . . thirsty . . . naked . . . or in prison?’** Neither know that it is Jesus when they reach down to pick up that starfish on the beach. **And for that matter, we just do not know either.**

**The one thing that sets righteous apart from the unrighteous is their understanding of faith.** For the righteous, faith is action based in love: They are drawn to their neighbor; something deep in their hearts compels them to offer aid and comfort to those in need. But for the unrighteous, faith is far easier. They understand faith to be an insulated relationship with God with no outside interference. According to this parable, they are wrong.

**And second, we are not saved by works; we are saved by our faith in Jesus alone.** There are ample Scripture passages to support this belief. In the third chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus tells Nicodemus that **‘WHOEVER BELIEVES IN THE SON WILL NOT BE CONDEMNED.’** And in the second chapter of Ephesians, Paul writes, **‘For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — not the result of works, so that no one can boast.’** The parable is very specific: the righteous are given the Kingdom.

**The final word of this parable is a word of grace.** *The Star-Thrower* continues his dance of life . . . Returning one starfish at a time to the life-giving waters of our Baptisms. In this broken world of ours, there are thousands of miles of beach and millions of starfish. But **Jesus the Star-Thrower** is there and he invites us to join him on the beach. And as we look into the eyes of our brothers and sisters, we can see Jesus our Savior; and that makes all the difference in the world. Amen.